

Tragic tale of a Wheatley woman whose mother, husband and three sons died in the WW1 years

One family's war heartbreak

THE First World War brought heartache to many families, including that of Selina Barrett,

Between 1914 and 1918, the mother of 10 lost her mother, husband and three sons, two of them in action.

Her eldest son, Ernest, was killed fighting the Germans just two months after he married.

He was born at Windmill Cottage, Wheatley, in 1893 and after leaving the village school, became a gentleman's manservant, working at Cuddesdon Theological College, then moving to London, where he joined the Queen's Westminster Rifle Corps.

It is not known when he joined the Army and what he did in the early part of the war. But it appears he was on leave when he married Ethel Lily Croucher, of Reigate, Surrey, on July 15, 1916.

The honeymoon period was brief as by September, he was in the trenches with the rest of his battalion, taking part in the Battle of the Somme.

Between September 7 and 10, near Corbie, the troops suffered heavy casualties under constant shelling. Three men won the Military Medal for gallantry in the offensive.

A week later, the battalion was ordered to attack German trenches starting at 5.50am on September 18. Because of earlier casualties, it was reorganised from four companies to three, two to attack and a third to be kept in reserve.

The two attacking companies went over the top and both had nearly reached their objective when they came under heavy machine gunfire and were unable to get into the enemy trench.

The only person to reach the trench was Second Lieutenant Jones, who was killed as he turned round to encourage his men.

What was left of the attacking force - three officers and 90 men - withdrew to the assembly trench from which they had started. The senior officer decided it was useless to throw any more men into the attack.

What remained of the battalion held the assembly trench for the rest of the day and was withdrawn from the firing line in the evening.

The battalion had lost three officers and 34 men, with 48 wounded and 14 missing, including Ernest.

He was recorded as killed on September



LOST: William Barrett, killed on August 30, 1918, *left*, and Ernest Barrett and his wife Ethel on their wedding day - he was killed two months later on September 18, 1916

18, 1916, and having no known grave. His name is listed, along with those of 73,411 others who died on the Somme in 1916-17, on the memorial at Thiepval.

Ernest's brother, William, was born at Windmill Cottage, Wheatley, in 1896 and worked as a farm labourer before joining the 1st Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

He was killed in France on August 30, 1918. He lost his life as the Allies came under heavy fire as they forced the Germans to retreat in the final months of the war.

During the operation, 16 men were killed, 127 wounded and 24 were reported missing out of a total of 937. William's grave is in the Vis-en-Artois cemetery.

Meanwhile, the soldiers' mother, Selina, whose maiden name was Cripps, had lost her husband John, a stonemason, who worked on Oxford colleges, her mother, Ellen, and her 16-year-old son, Lawrence, who died of flu. Two of her other children, George and Rosa, had died in 1887 and 1890, before their second birthdays.

Mavis Ramsden, of Wheatley, who has been researching the family history, tells me: "I knew Selina, my grandfather's sister, and several of her sons, but I feel sad that I never knew Ernest and William.

"We must remember all the brave men and women who gave their lives for our freedom and the families who suffered the losses."

▲ The Barrett family will feature in an

exhibition about Wheatley men who took part in the First World War. It is organised by the local branch of the Royal British Legion and takes place at the Merry Bells community hall on Saturday, November 15, from 10am to 4pm.